DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 236 FL 023 548

AUTHOR Brumfit, Christopher
TITLE Literacy: The Needs of Teachers and Learners.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 13p.; In: Perspectives on Reading. CLE Working Papers 2. For complete volume, see FL 023 547.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Behavior Standards; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; Interpersonal Competence; *Literacy; Social Behavior; Social Influences; Student Needs; *Unwritten Languages

ABSTRACT

This article discusses key issues of literacy that are important to both teachers and learners for understanding, and summarizes the function of literacy in three different groups: primary education, adult education, and communities with unwritten languages. The article investigates the scope of literacy, showing how this concept may be defined differently in different communities and challenging a number of assumptions and oversimplifications. The article is divided into the following sections: (1) literacy is not an absolute concept; (2) literacy is socially defined; (3) literacy is collaborative; (4) literacy needs imagination; (5) spoken and written language perform equally necessary functions; and (6) what we don't understand. (Contains 14 references.) (NAV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 392 236

Literacy: The Needs of Teachers and Learners

Christopher Brumfit

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C.J. Brumfit
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL 023548

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Literacy: The Needs of Teachers and Learners

Christopher Brumfit

There are three main sectors in education which have been concerned with initial literacy, and in many ways it is confusing to group them all together because their problems vary. In countries where literacy is well established within the community, all primary school teachers are concerned with introducing reading and writing to young children. At the same time, teachers of adults are concerned with learners who are dissatisfied with the level of skill in these areas that they reached at school, and with those who have come from overseas countries where literacy is less widespread than here. In addition, literacy campaigns in some overseas countries have been concerned with attempts to reduce illiteracy in whole communities, attempts which have sometimes been accompanied by the establishment of written forms of languages that had hitherto operated satisfactorily solely on the basis of oral demands. Each of these situations demands different responses. At the same time, however, our general studies of literacy as a phenomenon spill over into each of these areas, and none of the assumptions underpinning work in one of these areas can be ignored by those working in the others, if only because people move to and fro. Teachers and learners move from society to society, so our boundaries are never impermeable and our categories are never watertight.

Over the past twenty years our views on the nature of literacy have changed considerably. Some of this change has been the result of clearer understanding of the psychological and linguistic processes underlying reading and writing; much of it, however, has resulted from the changing role of literacy in the world, and the increased awareness we now have of literacy as a social construct (Cook-Gumperz 1986). In this paper I propose to examine a number of key ideas which both teachers and learners need to understand if they are to make sense of their own - and others' - literacy. The specific means by which different people achieve understanding will of course vary from person to person and from situation to situation. But if the areas I discuss are fundamentally misunderstood, a great deal of time will be wasted, and unnecessary frustration and unhappiness will be caused.

In addition to discussion of these general matters of concern, I shall raise a number of questions resulting from what we do not understand about literacy, for we need to know what areas no-one knows about even more than we need to understand other people's relevant knowledge. Probably more harm results from being unaware of our ignorance than from failing to grasp what we do understand.

Literacy is not an absolute concept

There is not a reader of this paper who is not illiterate in some dialect or style of English. There may even be a number who have difficulty in translating the negatives in the previous sentence satisfactorily, and would have even more difficulty if they encountered the sentence in the spoken form. Illiteracy may be conceived of as a failure to realise one's ambitions in reading or in writing - but clearly what are considered appropriate ambitions will vary from situation to situation.

Yet the liberal position I have stated above is unsatisfactory from many people's point of view, even if it is the position that most literacy drives in rich countries end up by adopting. Parents ask whether their children have learnt to read in the same way they ask whether they have learnt to swim, and with a similar intention. The point with swimming is not that it should have been efficient, but that it should include the confidence to lift your feet off the ground and sink to your own level in the water. Until that has happened everything else is academic. In the same way basic word recognition does indeed mean something to parents: children who can confidently jump from print with common words that they know how to pronounce to recognition of the meaning of the word have made a qualitative leap which can be built upon. Without that leap, they are necessarily disfranchised from our print-ridden society.

But we only have to think a little about this view to recognise that it is not the whole story. Teachers who dismiss the opinions of parents because they argue along these lines are unhelpful, because there clearly is a qualitative leap of the kind described - yet most of the children, or adults, who effectively make that leap still fail to realise anything like their self-desired potential as readers and writers. "I can read" can be considered an absolute statement; "I can read satisfactorily" cannot.

Gudschinsky offers the following definition of literacy:

> That person is literate who, in a language he speaks, can read with understanding anything he would have understood if it had been spoken to him; and can write, so that it can be read, anything he can say. (Gudschinsky, 1976)

But while this may be an entirely adequate definition in purely technical terms, it cannot account for the structure of different discourses in speech and writing. If spoken monologue is performed for long enough, and technically enough, the hearers may long for the conventions of writing, where they can return to the text, re-read for clarification and make notes in the margin, rather than those of speech which, as Samuel Johnson remarked, "dies on the lips of the speaker".

The basic point is that literacy must in practice be related to the wishes and needs of the user. And we do different things with writing and speech. Functional literacy depends on the functions of language that are needed. And because these functions change (few road signs demand reading any more, but lorry drivers need to read multilingual customs instructions), a general capacity has to be available, capable of developing in a number of different directions. Literacy refers both to the general capacity and to the specific uses to which it is put, to the perceptual and linguistic competence, and to the communicative competence without which the ability to understand the symbols alone would be useless. "There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (Hymes 1972).

What are the implications of this for teachers and learners? The major one is that no-one should imagine that being "literate" is a matter of passing one simply defined barrier. As with many other kinds of knowledge, it is the start of a journey, beginning a process which will necessarily continue for as long as the learner remains committed. Simple definitions are misleading and frustrating.

Literacy is socially defined

Jonathan Miller once commented on the fact that the term "patient" is a self-definition. It refers to people who have decided that their condition is such as to need treatment. We all carry illnesses with us all the time, but

only at certain times do we decide that without treatment we cannot continue - and the conditions for defining patienthood are partly determined by social views of acceptable or unacceptable behaviour (are we "patients" when we have a cold?) or of the seriousness of particular conditions (should stomach pains justify the removal of an appendix?). "Literacy" is a similar term - we define ourselves as either literate or illiterate, and how we do this is partly determined by the social norms of the group within which we live.

One problem which this poses is that, as social expectations increase, so the minimum requirements for adequate literacy are redefined upwards, and the number of "illiterates" increases as people become left below the redefined boundary, a point which Crystal (1986) has emphasised. Literacy relates to educational expectations, and follows desires for school-leaving certificates, professional qualifications, degrees, and so on. It is one of the markers of social adequacy, a sign of having joined the group of the reasonably competent in the world.

In this way the notion of literacy becomes norm-referenced, and the criterion used by Gudschinsky in the quotation already referred to becomes irrelevant: "you are illiterate" becomes a statement not about your ability to respond to print, but about your outsiderness.

The implications of this for teachers are that learners cannot be seen independently of the social context within which they operate. Expectations of the local community, parental attitudes, the model of language use presented by peers and by teachers themselves - all these become major factors in determining the attitudes of language learners.

For learners the implication is primarily that they should recognise the influence of the social group in which they live as unavoidable, and as one contributory factor to their expectations of literacy. If they see themselves as solely and uniquely responsible for a failure to achieve what they aspire to, the task of self-improvement will be far more difficult than if they recognise themselves as part of a culture with certain expectations that they may well wish to move outside of.

Literacy is collaborative

The previous comments have indicated that there is a social basis to literacy. In practice, as experienced teachers know well, learning to read and improving reading practices is frequently best addressed through collaborative projects. Children read best when they have been read to, when they have seen their parents and older brothers and sisters reading, and when they are part of a genuine reading community (see Wells 1985). So too do learners in school, as many experienced teachers report (e.g. Meek 1982).

There is a fundamental reason for this. Effective teaching develops when the purposes of what is being taught are clearly perceived. The establishment of a reading community demonstrates in living practice many of the purposes of written language. Reading for imaginative response and to obtain information, to follow arguments and to share others' experience follows naturally from project work and class activity that is closely related to complex purposes with many different roles for learners to perform. If reading is simply the meaningless performance of a classroom routine, accepting reading is simply a sign of being docile and unquestioning and the creative and intelligent are more likely to be the ones most alienated. To appreciate the value of a literate society you must live with a literate society, at close quarters.

Literacy needs imagination

It is very easy to define the language needs of adults in a highly utilitarian way. Society demands the comprehension of forms, notices, instructions and signs: it is indeed true to claim that someone who cannot understand these is placed at a major disadvantage in social life.

Yet there are coping strategies: as long as each family has access to some individual who can deal with legally required writing, as long as you intelligently follow the crowd and adopt the practices of the majority, you will not go far wrong. Nobody learns to read and write simply to cope: somewhere along the line they need to have felt a personal desire for written language, because it does something for them, for this individual person. And the ways in which each person identifies with written or

spoken language differ from context to context, as Heath, among others, has shown with great care in her study of two communities in the United States (Heath 1983).

To say that literacy requires imagination may simply be to restate what was said earlier, that reading must be for pleasure as well as for utility. But it could be a great deal more than this. We can engage imaginatively with a story, but we also engage imaginatively with arguments, with the accumulation of facts, with almost any human activity, because the process of committed engagement requires a response which is divergent, personal, making connections that have not previously occurred to others, in short, imagination. As Frank Smith has written, "Thought in its broadest sense is the construction of worlds, both 'real' and imaginary, learning is their elaboration and modification, and language - especially written language - is a particularly efficacious but by no means unique medium by which these worlds can be manifested, manipulated, and sometimes shared" (Smith 1985:197). It is not the messages, in the narrow sense of information, that language carries that are important (indeed as a means of simply conveying information language is relatively inefficient), but the structure of possible worlds, of schemata, of scenarios, of woven fabrics interpreting our varied experiences in pictures which are meaningful but necessarily personal, yet clear enough to be responded to by others. Without engagement of this kind, the role of language, and especially of written language, will always remain trivial and not worth exploring in any depth.

Spoken and written language perform equally necessary functions

The relationship between speech and writing is complex, and we no longer accept the somewhat simplistic view of early twentieth century linguistics that writing in some way "reflects" speech. Very recent work (e.g. Tannen 1982) suggests that the structures of speech and writing are dependent on what the purpose of the interaction is rather than on which of the two modes is being used. Writing is typically more decontextualised, but speech may also be decontextualised in formal settings, and the apparent

"completeness" of the written mode, without relying on paralinguistic features for maintaining discourse, as conversation does, is a function of the purpose of much writing - to argue a case, to inform, etc. - rather than of writing in itself. Where writing has more affective purposes, and where the technology allows it, paralinguistic devices in layout, typography and the use of other visual devices such as pictures may be frequent.

But writing does still lack adaptability, and this is the fundamental difference from speech. Effective literacy must depend on the ability to play in one's mind round an apparently unreceptive text (or other visual presentation) in order to reclaim the most probable picture or message it conveys. Doing this requires readers and writers to see such activity as necessary - hence writing and speech must be seen as complementary, each serving different functions in different contexts. To see the task as simply one of transferring what can be done in one mode to the other is to confuse the social roles of the two.

What we do not understand

There is a risk that we end up like the centipede, unable to put a foot forward because we are thinking so hard about the process of walking. I have heard impatient teachers object to discussion which persistently raises problems by saying that "we should simply get on and do what needs to be done, without thinking too much". It is easy to be too dismissive of this view. There is a great deal that can be done without over-much thought, and many of the tasks are too urgent to be sophisticated about. But to accept this view for too many people, too much of the time, plays into the hands of those who wish to administer a complex educational system as if there are no real complexities to address. When that happens, people who do not neatly fit the mould, either as the numerical majority or as part of the conventional pattern of aspiration, become marginalised and exploited. The social, political and moral effects of this for all of us may be disastrous; so we have a responsibility to look closely at some of the difficulties, at least.

Cook-Gumperz writes (1986: 14)

> Inherent in our contemporary attitude to literacy and schooling is a confusion between a prescriptive view of literacy, as a statement about the values and uses of knowledge, and a descriptive view of literacy, as cognitive abilities which are promoted and assessed through schooling. This latter, instrumental notion of literacy as a standardised set of basic cognitive skills is embedded in the selection and evaluation criteria that are central to schooling.

If we are to treat seriously the concern for literacy as a social construct that underlies the argument of this paper (and which any commentator would I think acknowledge to be the major clarification of the last twenty years of research), we must consider the implications for education of the conflict that Cook-Gumperz describes. For example, the proposals for testing of language development that are embedded in the National Curriculum appear to simply mirror the proposals for testing incorporated in other areas of the curriculum. But not only is language contextualised in a literal sense, but it is incorporated in a literal sense too, for it lies within each of us, essential to our self, our identity and our perception of our membership of different social groups. The extent to which this is true more for language than for other areas of the curriculum is enough to justify the claim that language is qualitatively different from other areas of the curriculum. Apart from anything else, spoken language will develop even if it is not part of the curriculum - this is only marginally true of other work, which is much more dependent for its very existence on the process of formal teaching.

But we can take this further. We have seen some of the complexities in the relationships between spoken and written language. Literacy is no longer as unnatural as it appeared to be even a few years ago, and it will become less and less unnatural as education becomes more widespread internationally. Different societies accommodate literacy in different ways. The key question for the next few years, it seems to me, is the relationship between the social adoption of literate norms by different

social groups and the schematic definition of literacy imposed, probably inevitably, by state education.

This should not be seen as some sort of deschooling attack on education. I can conceive of no realistic alternative to a formal educational system, and the most attractive propositions of anarchism have always seemed to me to lack any possibility of practical realisation, either in education or in government. But the potentially centralising effects of a state system of education need to be guarded against and mitigated if the system is not to be blamed for failures which are inherent in insensitive state control. And we cannot guard against something we cannot understand. If there are going to be national tests of literacy, by any definition, for any purpose, it is essential that we examine the relationships between cultural groups and their uses of literacy. What are the norms of literacy expected in different groups of society? What are the uses made of literacy by those who are defined as illiterate, whether by others or by themselves? How much of the discussion of the effects of literacy in the past was actually discussion of the effects of formal schooling, or of an increasing formalisation of serious oral discourse (see Gee 1986 for a very interesting discussion of this issue, and also Scribner and Cole's (1981) work in Liberia). So much of what has been examined by researchers has implications for the diversity of "normal" societies, but has been based on bilingual or rapidly changing societies. We need to ask the same questions here for monolingual, apparently homogeneous groups.

Why do we need to ask such questions? Because the European educational systems grew up before education was widely studied as a phenomenon, and because many of the fundamental questions raised in research of the last twenty years have arisen from work in the urgent situations of third world countries or of migrant education in industrialised countries. Yet what has been revealed time and time again is that the old homogeneity never existed, that education is still tied to the nineteenth century nationalist view of the monolithic nation state (a potent myth and arguably a necessary one, but still a myth!). It is time for the older educational systems to benefit from our understanding of the younger ones, for if they do not, they will surely fail to meet the challenges of the next few years. Ignorance

of how the system works is never a good recipe for advances in policy. (The beginnings of work of this kind could be seen in, for example, Chapter 5 of Gubb, Gorman and Price 1987, and potentially in the whole international study of which their report is a part.)

So the different sections I commented on at the beginning of this paper have much to contribute to each other. The most interesting work in literacy has concentrated on the third world, and some adult work, but its implications for understanding normal literacy are considerable. Indeed, if we fail to understand the relationships between the structure of literacy in different social groups, we risk being unable to interpret the results of the monitoring of literacy, being unable to adapt teaching strategies to the needs of learners, and consequently being unable to provide basic education at all. In today's society there are different kinds of literacies: tests of illiteracy will fail to address our greatest problems unless they are related to a far fuller understanding than is currently available. Yet the tools are there, the models of research are there, and many of the initial insights are already available in the literature that has been referred to. Neither governments nor educationists can afford to advance in ignorance.

References

Cook-Gumperz J (ed.) (1986) *The Social Construction of Literacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Crystal D (1986) "Literacy 2000", *English Today*, Oct-Dec: 9-13

Gee J P (1986) "Orality and literacy: from 'The savage mind' to 'Ways with words'", *TESOL Quarterly* 20.4: 719-746

Gubb J, T Gorman and E Price (1987) *The Study of Written Composition in England and Wales*, Windsor: NFER-Nelson

Gudschinsky S (1976) *Literacy: the Growing Influence of Linguists*, The Hague: Mouton

Heath S B (1983) *Ways with Words*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hymes D (1972) "On communicative competence", in Pride and Holmes

Meek M (1982) *Learning to Read*, London: The Bodley Head

Olson D R, N Torrance and A Hildyard (eds.) (1985) *Literacy, Language and Learning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Pride J and J Holmes (eds.) (1972) *Sociolinguistics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Scribner S and M Cole (1981) *The Psychology of Literacy*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Smith F (1985) "A metaphor for literacy: creating worlds or shunting information?", in Olson, Torrance and Hildyard

Tannen D (ed.) (1982) *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*, Norwood NJ: Ablex

Wells G (1985) *Language Development in the Pre-school Years*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press